Workers Struggles: The Americas

15 April 2008

Protest in Uruguay over wages and pensions

On April 9, Uruguayan Trade Unions launched a four-hour general strike to demand higher wages and pensions and better working conditions. The protest was organized by the Inter-Union Plenary/National Labor Convention (PIT-CNT) to pressure the social-democratic government of President Tabaré Vázquez.

This was the first national strike since Tabaré Vázquez was elected in March 2005 at the head of a coalition of left-radical parties.

So far, Uruguay has been spared from the inflationary wave affecting food and commodities across Latin America. However, recent changes in natural gas contracts with Argentina are expected to put increasing pressure on energy prices.

Haitians protest against rising prices

Five people have been killed by security forces and another nine have been wounded as Haitians continued protests last week against rising food prices. More than 80 percent of Haitians live on US$2.00 (1.26 euros) a day or less.

Thousands of protesters have taken to the streets demanding an end to high prices, corruption, government ineptitude and the presence of foreign troops.

On April 8, protesters attempting to reach the Presidential Palace in Port Au Prince clashed with UN troops. In Port Au Prince, on April 9, police and UN troops were unable to control rioting as people broke into stores and warehouses.

Demonstrators have denounced the government of Rene Preval for destroying the nation's agriculture with liberal free market policies and for standing by while the vast majority of the nation's inhabitants depend on imports from the Dominican Republic.

On Saturday, Preval announced that the government would reduce the price of rice from US$51 to US$43 for a 50-pound bag.

Bolivian tin miners on strike

Five thousand miners at the Huanuni mine went on strike on April 1. Huanuni is Bolivia's biggest tin mine, producing nearly half of the country's entire tin output. Comibol, a state-run company, operates the mine. Comibol's technical director announced that the miners had rejected a 20 percent raise and were instead demanding 30 percent.

The world tin price, US$9/pound, is 45 percent higher than it was a year ago and three times what it was five years ago.

Mexico: Strike against Grupo Mexico mines in its ninth month

The National Miners and Metal Workers Union rejected the latest pronouncement by the transnational Grupo Mexico. Grupo Mexico management, in paid advertisements that appeared in Mexico City dailies, demanded the Mexican Government "enforce the law" to prevent workers from striking at the Cananea copper mine in Sonora State.

Union leader Pavon Campos charged Grupo Mexico with calling for a repeat of the events of April 20 two years ago, when government security forces attempted to end the strike at the SICARTSA steel mill in Michoacan State. Two strikers were killed, and more than 100 were wounded by the police.

Pavon also referred to attacks on striking miners by paramilitary groups that operate "in parallel" with Grupo Mexico in Nacozari and Sonora and in Cananea itself. Last August, Reynaldo Hernandez Gonzalez was fatally shot in the head and 15 miners were kidnapped and tortured by a gang financed by Grupo Mexico. In January of this year, government troops attempted to open the Cananea Mine and forcibly end the strike.

Pavon also denounced the working conditions that miners face in Grupo Mexico mines and indicated that the company has yet to account for the Pasta de Conchos mine collapse of February 2006 in which 65 miners "were assassinated" and whose bodies were never recovered.

© World Socialist Web Site

The strike at the Cananea copper mine and at mines in the states of Taxco, Guerrero and Zacatecas began on July 30, 2007. The strikers are demanding better and safer working conditions and the return of exiled mine leader Napoleon Gomez, who was removed from the leadership of the union by former Mexican President Vicente Fox.

Nevada nurses protest working conditions

Some 150 nurses who work at Renown Regional Medical Center in Reno held a protest to call attention to a lack of safe staffing at northern Nevada's largest hospital. Nurses moved their protest from the front of the medical center, after hospital management threatened to fire any employees who participated, and instead marched through the downtown casino district. They ended their protest across from the County courthouse.

Carrying signs that said, "Patients Before Profits" and "Safe Staffing Saves Lives," nurses are calling attention to the fact that Renown increased the hospital's payroll by only 1.5 percent during the 2003-2005 period while CEO James Miller's compensation package increased by 84.3 percent to more than $1.1 million. The hospital has also invested in a new $318 million luxury tower that provides private patient suites with 26-inch flat screen televisions and original artwork.

Meanwhile, according to the Service Employees International Union, the hospital lost 22 percent of its nurse force last year due to poor working conditions.

Lynn Shabi, a 25-year nurse veteran at the hospital, told the Associated Press, "If Renown has enough money to build the new Tahoe tower, fill the rooms with original art and give CEO Jim Miller an 83 percent raise, there is no excuse for Renown not to have enough nurses at the bedside to provide safe care."

Strike at Illinois parts supplier

Members of United Auto Workers Local 2343 struck the ZF Boge Elastmetall parts plant in Paris, Illinois, April 6 after their old contract expired. The dispute centers on wages and the company's demand for higher medical co-payments and deductibles.

ZF Boge wants to impose cuts, claiming the average wage of $14 an hour for skilled labor at the Paris plant is the highest in the area. A company press release stated, "The current business climate in the rubber-metal industry is extremely competitive, due to the influx of suppliers from China, Korea and India."

The company also plans to consolidate some of its operations by expanding the Paris plant. Company president Greg White warned, "I don't know what impact this strike could have on that decision." ZF Boge is based in Germany and employs 58,000 workers at 120 plants in 25 countries. In 2007, the company's total sales amounted to $16.4 billion.

Workers strike Indiana auto parts manufacturer

Workers at Intat Precisions in Rushville, Indiana, went on strike April 7 after rejecting a company proposal that would sharply hike insurance costs. The 240 members of United Auto Workers Local 2339 are opposing a 400 percent increase in insurance rates along with hourly wage reductions and new contract language that would make it more difficult to accrue vacation time.

No new negotiations are currently scheduled. Intat Precisions is the largest parts manufacturer in Rushville and provides auto parts for Toyota Corp.

McGill University TAs on strike

Teaching assistants at McGill University in Montreal, Quebec, went on strike April 8 to protest stalled negotiations after voting overwhelmingly for strike action at the end of March.

The 2,000 strikers are represented by the Association of Graduate Students Employed at McGill (AGSEM) and have been without a contract since last summer. They are fighting for improvements in training and wages as well as limits on workloads The last contract took more than two years to negotiate and was only signed after a strike in 2003.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site